

## ON THE NET

### Wikipedia: A Multilingual Treasure Trove

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#### INTRODUCTION

Encyclopedias are excellent sources of basic introductory information on historical and cultural topics for foreign language (FL) students. The articles in these reference works do not have the depth of more extensive works such as magazine articles, books, and even web sites addressing a topic, but such depth is generally not the best introduction to new concepts in a foreign language. Their brief overviews can serve as a better first exposure, quickly giving the student the main ideas that can later be filled in with more breadth and depth through additional reading as needed. In addition, the FL student will inevitably encounter many new concepts in the target language culture but have difficulty understanding the explanation, which is itself often full of additional new concepts and vocabulary. An electronic encyclopedia can present the advantage of hypertext links from these new expressions in one article to explanations and information in another article. This has always been a powerful feature of all encyclopedias dating at least back to Diderot's 18th century France, but the electronic format and hypertext makes jumping from one article to another much easier than flipping through pages.

Electronic encyclopedias have long been available for many of the languages that we teach, produced by software companies (e.g., Encarta) or by the same people who make paper encyclopedias. The Internet, with its revolution in our ability to exchange information quickly, has lead to a fundamental change in the way software and other kinds of information can be produced, modified and distributed. The **open source** revolution has given us what has become one of the most popular encyclopedias in the world, and it is currently active in 108 languages (including Klingon). Thirty-seven of these different language editions have more than 10,000 articles at the current time.

#### WIKIPEDIA



Wikipedia ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main\\_Page](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page)) is a highly successful, free, web-based, multilingual, open source encyclopedia. It is run by the non-profit Wikimedia foundation. According to co-founder Jimmy Wales in "[Wikipedia is an encyclopedia](#)", 8 March 2005, "Wikipedia is first and foremost an effort to create and distribute a free encyclopedia of the highest possible quality to every single person on the planet in their own language."

How does this work? As in most electronic encyclopedias, one can browse articles or search for topics. Words and expressions within any article that are explained elsewhere in the encyclopedia are formatted as hypertext links to those other articles. But Wikipedia is different in the way it is written. Articles in traditional encyclopedias are written by experts with credentials. In Wikipedia, anyone can edit an article.

Indeed, the Wikipedia slogan is "The free encyclopedia that anyone can edit at will." The assumption is that after many individuals have contributed their edits, an article will improve over time through a sort of evolutionary process. A history of edits remains available so readers can decide for themselves if they agree with changes. A series of tabs at the top of an article provides access to the tools for discussing, exploring, and even editing the article.



The **discussion** tab is a place for users/readers to exchange ideas about the contents of the article. Under **edit this page** the reader can make corrections or additions. **History** gives the user access to previous versions of the article and includes explanations of the specific changes made and who made them. For a typical article, one finds many minor changes such as spelling corrections, stylistic changes, small factual corrections, but also some major changes, vandalism, and corrections reverting to a prior version of the article.



Additional tools allow the reader to backtrack to other articles that link to the current one, yielding a sort of bi-directional hyperlink. One can also see recent changes in those linked pages as well as those in the current page. Multimedia files may be uploaded and included in an article if they do not have copyright issues. A printable version of the article is available.

Complete information about how to cite the article in various citation styles is included along with a strong disclaimer warning readers that it may be inappropriate to cite an encyclopedia "as a source of any information."

**NOTE:** Most teachers and professionals do not consider it appropriate to use [tertiary sources](#) such as encyclopedias as a sole source for any information. Wikipedia articles should be used for background information, and as a starting point for further research.

As with any [community-built](#) reference, there is a possibility for error in Wikipedia's content — please check your facts against multiple sources and read our [disclaimers](#) for more information.

The recommendation in this note is very good advice about how to use and how not to misuse the encyclopedia. In fact, this disclaimer can lead to a good teachable moment, helping the student not just to find a piece of information but to better understand the difference between good and bad research.

One advantage of a Wikipedia article over a Google search for the many web sites that might address a topic is that Wikipedia does have a review process through these multiple edits that is totally lacking in most web sites where only one author has editorial control. That does not mean that at any given moment, a fact mentioned in an article is correct, but it does mean that inaccuracies generally should tend to be corrected over time. On the other hand, anyone can add inaccurate information to an article at any time, making it unreliable. The same openness that makes Wikipedia powerful is also the cause of problems for which it has been criticized by encyclopedia publishers and Wikipedians alike.

An additional problem that we have encountered is what appears to be an explosion of plagiarism by web page authors taking the text of their page from Wikipedia or from other pages. Thus, as students use the web for their research, they tend to encounter the same information from what they may believe are multiple sources, but that are in fact the same source. Teachers and students need to be aware of such problems to avoid the pitfalls of working online. This also leads us back to the basic flaw of using any encyclopedia, a tertiary source, in place of primary and secondary sources in research.

## OPEN SOURCE

The model upon which Wikipedia is based is similar to the development of open source software. In this model, many individuals freely contribute some amount of work to a project, adding features and fixing bugs. The number of talented individuals making small contributions can lead to better software development than may be possible by a single company creating their product inhouse on a limited budget. Open source projects generally do have someone in charge to control who can participate or at least which modifications should be incorporated. In his book, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century*, Thomas Friedman describes open source as one of the major "world flatteners", leading to free world-wide collaboration and competition (2005).

Open source development is a community effort and Wikipedia is a community of volunteers who contribute to making it a successful endeavor. Many regular users keep a watch on particular articles that they wish to monitor for changes so they are notified whenever anyone contributes an edit. As one can imagine, articles on controversial topics tend to change frequently.



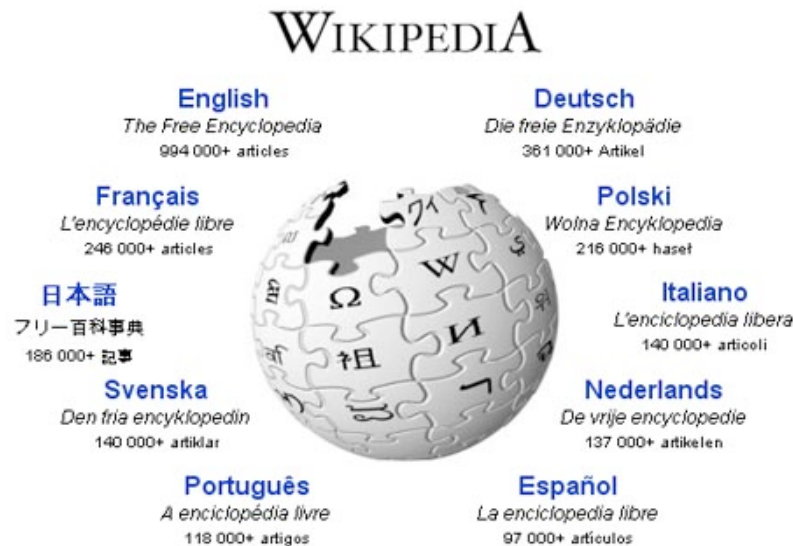
Wikipedia's **navigation** menu includes links that are specifically related to building this community.

## LANGUAGE EDITIONS

The main interest of Wikipedia for the FL teacher is its availability in so many languages. These are not translations, but actually separate projects or separate language communities of individuals contributing to and editing each version.

The language versions of Wikipedia are divided into three groups based on their number of contributed articles. These are listed at the bottom of the main page. The first group includes those with the largest number of articles, over 100,000, putting them on a par with most traditional encyclopedias such as Britannica and Columbia or other electronic encyclopedias such as Encarta or Hachette. These major language editions include English, German, French, Polish, Japanese, Italian, Swedish, Dutch, Portuguese, and Spanish.

The second group, having at least 10,000 articles, certainly a very respectable size, includes Arabic, Bulgarian, Catalan, Czech, Danish, Estonian, Esperanto, Persian, Galician, Hebrew, Croatian, Ido, Indonesian, Korean, Lithuanian, Hungarian, Malay, Norwegian, Romanian, Russian, Slovak, Slovenian, Serbian, Finnish, Turkish, Ukrainian, and Chinese.



Links to all of the available Wikipedia language editions, including the third group of editions containing at least 1,000 articles and other language editions that may be just getting started, can be found on the Multilingual Coordination page ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Multilingual\\_coordination](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Multilingual_coordination)). The number of articles in any language is constantly growing, so this listing will be out of date as soon as it appears.

## PROBLEMS

Wikipedia is criticized for a number of flaws inherent in the way it works ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Criticism\\_of\\_Wikipedia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Criticism_of_Wikipedia)). Clearly, the fact that something is stated in Wikipedia does not make it true. Students should be warned that facts need to be checked and that Wikipedia should not be used as a quotable source for research, but this is true of all encyclopedias. There is even disagreement about whether Wikipedia is any less accurate than other encyclopedias. But for the FL teacher, the issue is not whether or not this tool is better or worse than an expensive hard-cover reference work. This is a popular tool that is now being used extensively and that we can teach our students to use in the target language.

## CONCLUSION

Used judiciously, Wikipedia can be a valuable source of information, discussion, and even controversy that can underpin language instruction and learning in the FL classroom. The dynamic and permeable nature of this open source example is akin to interlanguage (Selinker, 1972) in that it is ever-changing and moving along a continuum, ostensibly toward greater accuracy and increased knowledge availability. As with all technological innovations, it should be viewed as one more tool for use by FL instructors and learners to increase their exposure to a wide variety of topics of historical and cultural interest.

## REFERENCES

- Friedman, T. L. (2005). *The world is flat: A brief history of the twenty-first century*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Selinker, L. (1972). Interlanguage. *IRAL*, 10, 209-231.